

OBITUARY

## Edward Webster: 29 March 1942 to 5 March 2024

Peter Fairbrother

University of Tasmania, Australia  
Email: [peter.fairbrother@utas.edu.au](mailto:peter.fairbrother@utas.edu.au)

(Received 16 May 2024; accepted 16 May 2024)

Edward (Eddie) Webster, emeritus professor, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, died unexpectedly on 5 March, 2024. His influence, his friendship, and his engagement, intellectually and politically, are evident from the outpouring around the world, and especially in South Africa. Many of us had been in contact with Eddie in the previous weeks, working with him in his notably collaborative way. Eddie will be remembered as a warm, enthusiastic, and inclusive person, who touched many of our lives in multiple ways. My concern here is to remember Eddie as a politically engaged intellectual who promoted the best in social science research, cutting across many cognate disciplines. His legacy will matter for decades to come.

I have known of Eddie for many decades, going back to the early debates in the 1990s about the labour movement and the transition to democracy in South Africa. As many of us struggled to understand the complex and contested politics of this period, we looked to Eddie for an understanding of these debates. For Eddie, this period marked the beginning of his elaboration of a comprehensive political economy of the period, with labour centre staged. Together with others, such as his lifelong friend Rob Lambert (Caspersz 2019), Eddie was a major theorist of political unionism in the context of the struggles taking place in South Africa, before and after transition. His analyses, both individually and with many others, set the scene for an influential international engagement and a sophisticated intellectual understanding of the politics of the period.

My active writing involvement with Eddie came with reference to social movement unionism and the associated question as to whether unions are indeed social movements. Eddie focused on social movement unionism in relation to Black unions in South Africa. This work was pathbreaking with the recognition that a distinctive form of unionism was in the process of emerging, defined by Eddie and others as social movement unionism. In developing this analysis, Eddie drew a distinction with unions in the liberal democracies of the North. This earlier debate noted the inadequacies of Northern unionism, as business unions (mature unions), as well as the hazards of the ‘political unionism’ (tied or subordinated to political parties) elaborated by correspondence with Eddie, 6 May 2007. Eddie made the case for social movement unionism in the context of closed economies and political authoritarianism, in South Africa, Brazil, and South Korea. He, with others, argued that social movement unionism emerged in the South in the 1970s and 1980s (Webster 1988; see also von Holdt 2002). However, in a cautionary note, Glenn Adler and Eddie (2000) cautioned against universalising the particular circumstances and situation of such union forms. These contributions helped define unionism in more sophisticated and distinctive ways, laying the foundation for many of the current debates in labour studies about unions as social movements.

Following sharp comment on a first paper authored by me (Fairbrother 2008), in consultation with Eddie, we then made our own joint contribution (Fairbrother and Webster 2008). We made three points, which have implications for how we all understand unions today. First, as Richard Hyman noted in 2001, trade unions in the liberal democracies are social movements arising in the context of questioning the ‘principles of the prevailing social and economic order’ (p. 61). Specifically, trade unions emerged as social movements (pp. 60–62), resting on the dualism which defines trade unions to this day: as a ‘sword of justice’ or as a ‘vested interest’, or variants thereof. Second, we followed a ‘dimensions’ approach to the study. The first dimension is that ‘trade unions are a particular kind of social movement that contains progressive and accommodating dimensions’ (Fairbrother and Webster 2008: 310). This starting point leads to the next dimension, the ‘tension between market and society’. The third dimension draws attention to ‘class and class relations’. Our conceptualisation presented ‘the class focus as contained within the first dimension, the tension between movement—the mobilization of class and popular movements—and institutionalization—the accommodation of class interests within institutions’ (Fairbrother and Webster 2008: 310; cf., Hyman 2001: 4). Taken together, this way of focusing on unions lays the foundation for a progressive and emancipatory understanding of trade unions. Hence, trade unions as class organisations are the ‘counterintuitive dimension of capitalism, locally and globally’ (Fairbrother and Webster 2008: 312).

Of note, in these discussions about unions, Eddie extended our analyses by prefiguring the work he with Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout did in their award winning book, *Grounding Globalization: Labour in the Age of Insecurity* (Webster et al 2008). They argue that the dominant policy paradigm of the contemporary world, the neoliberal project, is in effect a ‘Second Great Transformation’ viz Karl Polyani (Webster et al 2008: vii). Indeed, Eddie and his colleagues argue forcefully that the neoliberal strategy comprises a deliberate process of ‘manufacturing insecurity’ explicitly to undermine the ‘collective power of civil society movements’ (p. vii). Their proposition is that this dominant paradigm would eventually occasion a mobilised collective shift against the market fundamentalism that has been advanced and celebrated for over four decades. As with the best of such theorising, this applied study cautiously and carefully lays out the case for interpreting the recovery that may be underway, as regulation is hesitantly rediscovered to counter the degradations of society and the environment by these so-called unregulated markets.

Most recently, Eddie sought to bring questions relating to power back into core focus (Schmalz et al 2018). As one of the three guest editors to a series of publications on the power resource approach, Eddie was once again part of a cluster of writers seeking to understand, interpret, and apply recent conceptual developments on labour and society, and in turn, the future of labour. This approach begins with a claim, neglected by many over the past few decades, that organised labour has the capacity to act strategically in a world where insecurity has been manufactured by governments in compliance with the expressed interests of capital (Schmalz et al 2018). These authors note ‘that organised labour can successfully defend its interests by collective mobilisation of power resources’ (2018: 113). Rather than an arid defence of the academy, they note that the approach has its roots in the richness of applied research involving scholars and unionists. As noted by them: ‘a form of “organic public sociology in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public”’ (Burawoy 2005: 7; cited in Schmalz et al 2018: 113). It is also a form of scholarship that does not drown itself in a myriad of conceptual distinctions that end up being relatively meaningless, overlapping, and often confusing. Rather, these authors are working in a tradition long laid out by Eddie: write with like colleagues, ask the tough questions, do not forget the established studies, and analyses that still have merit and learning.

The intellectual and applied achievements by Eddie are displayed in full with his involvement with the Global Labour University (<https://global-labour-university.org/>). This worldwide initiative is a partnership of trade unions, universities, the International Labour Organisation, and other related labour bodies and networks. Eddie was the founder and Chair of the Global Labour University at the University of Witwatersrand and founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Global Labour Journal, a joint venture between Witwatersrand and McMaster University, Canada.

These latter endeavours and engagements are the culmination of his pioneering and ongoing work advocating an inclusive and progressive sociology of work and employment in South Africa, and across the world. He became an internationally renowned sociologist. He was a delight to work with; he shaped and enabled a remarkable legacy. I/we will continue to advance the debates and concerns that defined his life as a truly international scholar. It is my privilege to have known Eddie.

## References

- Adler G and Webster E (2000) *Social Movement Unionism in South Africa: A Reassessment Where it all Began*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association. Unpublished paper presented at a special session on Neoliberal Restructuring and Social Movement Unionism, August 12–16.
- Burawoy M (2005) For public sociology. *American Sociological Review* 70(1), 4–28.
- Caspersz D (2019). Rob Lambert: 24 December 1945–20 May 2019. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 30(3), 452–453.
- Fairbrother P (2008) Social movement unionism or trade unions as social movements. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 20 (2), 213–220.
- Fairbrother P and Webster E (2008) Social movement unionism: questions and possibilities. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 20 (3), 309–313.
- Hyman R (2001) *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*. London: Sage.
- Schmalz S, Ludwig C and Webster E (2018) The power resources approach: developments and challenges. *Global Labour Journal* 9(2), 113–134.
- von Holdt K (2002) Social movement unionism: the case of South Africa. *Work, Employment and Society* 16(2), 283–304.
- Webster E (1988) The rise of social movement unionism: the two faces of the black trade union movements in South Africa. In P. Frankel, N. Pines and M. Swilling (eds), *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa*, London: Croom Helm, 174–196.
- Webster E, Lambert R and Bezuidenhout A (2008) *Grounding Globalization: Labour in the Age of Insecurity*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.